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Taft, William Howard

The signs of the times

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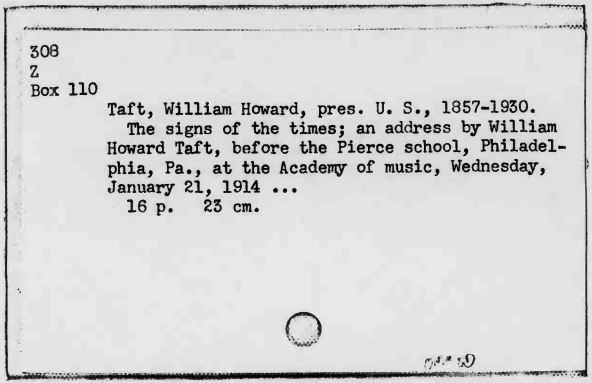

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Taft, William Howard, pres. U. S., 1857-1930.
The signs of the times; an address by William Howard Taft, before the Pierce school, Philadelphia, Pa., at the Academy of music, Wednesday, January 21, 1914 ...
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The Signs of the Times

An Address

By

WILLIAM HOWARD TAFT

Before the Pierce School, Philadelphia, Pa., at the Academy of Music, Wednesday, January 21, 1914

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Box 110

Sent out with the Compliments of George H. Paine, Philadelphia, Pa.

June 22, 1923 [illegible]

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:

Experience is said to be the best teacher, but this aphorism, like so many others, states only part of the truth. There is no task in life that can not be made easier by the teaching of those who know. There are many business men, of limited vision, who say "The only way to learn principles of business is to work up from the bottom and learn their value in their application." Self-made business men are said to be the best business men. This is not true. Men who have not had the benefit of business education have made great success, but they have made it in spite of difficulties which they might have avoided. Thorough education would have improved their business knowledge and bettered their business judgment. When I look over the curriculum of the Pierce School for Business, I regret that I did not have the privilege of taking the courses which I find that Miss Pierce provides for those who come under the discipline and instruction of this school which her father founded. This is not because I would like to have been a business man or because my taste lay in that direction, for it did not. But it is because I have found by experience that a knowledge of business methods, and business principles, is a constantly recurring need, both for those who practice my profession of the law, and for those who perform judicial functions. They are also most important and helpful to those who are charged with the official responsibility of the conduct of government, in which, in one capacity or another, until recently, I have been engaged almost continuously for twenty-seven years. Not only would I like to have gone through this banking and business course, but I would also like to have taken the shorthand course in the Pierce School. I can see now what tremendous advantages it would have given me in the discharge of the duties which have fallen to me in my life. My father, whose industry, enterprise, and wide general interest in every improvement impress themselves on me the longer I live, took up stenography, rather late in life, but mastered it sufficiently to leave many of his notes and manuscripts in the corresponding style of the Pitman system, which an expert can easily read. He found it most useful as a lawyer, as a Judge, as a cabinet officier, and as a diplomatic representative abroad. I have advised my boy, who is just now beginning the practice of the law, with a first-class legal education, and who is much more thoroughly drilled in the principles of law than I was when I came to the Bar,

that he ought to supplement his general theoretic knowledge of the law with a course at a good business school where he can acquire just what is given in your banking and business course and what is given in your shorthand course. Of course one can not play every instrument in the band, at least at the same time—though some persons seem to think they can—and this is an age of division of labor. But a young lawyer is not overpowered with business usually. The public is not demanding his time and energy, and I don't know anything more useful to him later in an active practice than just such courses.

But as I am not a business man, and as I can only speak generally of the usefulness of a business education, I am sure I am not expected in these remarks to address myself to such a technical subject, I, therefore, fall into the conventional attitude of the commencement speaker, who usually seeks to instil in the joyous expectant and ambitious souls of those about to receive their diplomas, and to enter into the real struggles of life, some thoughts drawn from actual living which are submitted with the hope that they may be of some assistance in avoiding the pitfalls and taking the advantages, that conditions of society now present to those becoming participants in the battle for success in the field of human endeavor.

The Changes of a Generation

I remember that I was in Washington, as a sophomore from Yale, in the summer of 1876, when my father was Attorney-General, and I spent three weeks in the Capital. One evening I happened to be with my father, when we met Senator Lucius Quintus Cincinnatus Lamar, some time Senator from Mississippi, and afterwards a Justice of the Supreme Court. He was a broad man, of catholic views, of a delightful personality, of sincerest patriotism, and with the courage of his convictions. He was sympathetic, and took an interest in me as a boy, an interest I am glad to say that manifested itself later when I came into official relations with the great tribunal of which he was an honored member. He asked me what my age was, and what I expected to do, and congratulated me upon the prospect. My father said to him, that he doubted whether I would live through as interesting and as a critical a period in the history of the country as the Justice and he had been part of, to which the Justice replied that with the

reunion of the sections, he thought a period of prosperity and happiness opened before our country that it would be a delight to live in, and he felicitated me that my generation was to enjoy it. That was in '76. A generation covers perhaps thirty-six years, and, although I deny being an old man, a generation has come and gone since that conversation, and what Mr. Justice Lamar said, has been vindicated by the event. We have had a period of prosperity and growth and expansion that even the Justice with his prophetic vision did not dream of. The increase of our business and of our wealth per capita, the growth of our national prestige, and the cheapening of all the necessities of life, except food, are so great that they are hardly to be credited. So rapidly, however, do we become accustomed to quick and cheap transportation, to quick and cheap communication for all, and to other great improvements, that when a discovery that has given to us new comforts of life is ten years old, we have come to regard them as necessities and their deprivation as a hardship. The humblest workman to-day enjoys more domestic and every-day convenience than good Queen Bess in the height of her power, or indeed the monarchs of the eighteenth Century. Great material growth is essential to keep up with the increase of population and to give opportunity for greater spiritual growth of the individual and the community. We must not decry, therefore, the great benefit that has come to the world from these results of human ingenuity, application and sacrifice. It has been due to our system of individual liberty, the right of property and the impetus of the motive of enlightened selfishness that is encouraged by our present social and governmental system. If no adequate reward had been provided for strenuous effort, self-denial, and the cultivation of those prudential virtues that are always essential to progress, society would have been reduced to a dead level of comparative inactivity, to the mere dragging out of physical existence, and with no time or opportunity for higher development. But this tremendous energy in the accumulation of capital and wealth has had an evil accompaniment. The attention of all the people was focused on material success. All other motives and all other considerations were for a time absorbed in the chase for the dollar. The valuable discovery of the value of combination, first in mechanical devices greatly saving human labor, and then of capital, in the reduction in the cost of operation, led to its use for another and more sinister purpose, to wit, in the establishment of

monopolies. These were obtained in the form of public franchises and privileges, with adequate governmental control, and in the form of trusts. Agents of great corporations, for the purpose of maintaining their power, sought political influence and political control through abhorrent and corrupt means; and, through the lethargy of the electorate in the discharge of their political functions and their neglect in the selection and careful watching of their representatives in government, there came to be a plutocratic control of political agencies that threatened the integrity of the government and its utility as a beneficent instrument of a free people.

The Crusade Against Plutocracy

For the last decade or more, there has been a crusade against plutocracy which has brought about a marvelous change among the people and has developed in them a concern and care to suppress corporate corrupt control of politics. This has worked a great reform. It was not to be expected, however, that all the people could be roused to such a danger and to the measures necessary to remedy its evil results, without some unwise excesses. We are now passing through the period when such excesses are manifesting themselves. Enthusiasts are sure that men and society are changing and that something like a millennium is at hand, and results are prophesied which are not only contrary to experience, but are altogether at variance with human nature as we know it. I am an optimist, and I have no doubt that as some of these nostrums are tried out and found to be failures, others will be rejected without costly experiment, and that the sedative effect of a little time and hard-headed common sense of the American people will serve to classify these quack remedies in the category where they belong. But we who believe them chimerical and not free from danger must talk out in respect to them. We must not be prevented by the attacks of sincere but misguided people upon our motives or our intelligence, from withholding the truthful view of many things that they advocate. Such persons are much inclined to regard one as a virtuous man or an evil-doer as he approves or disapproves their plans for social regeneration. This is natural in the advocates of real reforms as well as in those of pseudo-reforms. We have no right, therefore, to complain of it, but must recognize it as a condition of the situation.

One tendency to which the enthusiasm of this great and beneficial movement has led a number of extremists and toward which, indeed, for a temporary period all society seems to be inclining, is to discover the cure for the defects of our present democracy in more democracy and the material abandonment or modification of representative government. Many thoroughly believe in this cure as the only escape from a plutocracy. Many who don't believe in it and see clearly its efficiency and dangers, are without the courage of their convictions and go along in the procession, with the hope that it will wear itself out, and that meantime they will not lose touch with the majority.

Constitutional Government Threatened

That the movement may ultimately result in some minor useful changes in our present system, I am not prepared to deny. But that, if given the full form proposed for it now by its earnest promoters, it will result in a destruction of the independence of the judiciary and of our constitutional government, and in taking away all our possible political efficiency I can not doubt. The principles we now seek to enforce in our government, however imperfectly, are that all men should be regarded as equal before the law, and that all men should be given, as far as possible, equal opportunity for the maintenance, by their own efforts, of themselves and their families and for the pursuit of their happiness.

In its ultimate analysis, this so-called movement toward purer democracy tends to encourage a state of the public mind in which all men are regarded as equal in experience and intelligence, and in which there shall be no authority or influence resting on superior character, service or knowledge. Leadership is to be discouraged and we are to have a dead level of comfort and happiness and political power and influence for all individuals. This has not been, and can not be, and never will be, because it is contrary to human nature, and, even if it were not utterly impractical and chimerical and could be forced on society, it would result in retrogression and a great obstruction to the pursuit of happiness. Inequalities are inseparable from the development of man's character and human progress. They are as essential as temptation is to virtue in any world we know.

I am not greatly concerned as to the ultimate result of such movements unsound from both a political and an economical stand-

point, because as Horace somewhere says, "You can drive human nature out of the door with a pitch-fork, and it will come back through the window." One can not suspend the economical law dependent on that human nature any more than one can suspend the law of gravitation, and these constant elements in the situation operating against the aims of impractical reformers, however enthusiastic, will ultimately assert themselves. But what I am anxious to do is to head off these experiments as soon as we can in order that the retarding of human progress by such nostrums may be minimized.

Social Unrest

Now it is said there is great unrest in society. Perhaps there is. Certainly the attacks on the motives of good people, the unjust assaults upon the commendable accumulation of wealth, the failure to discriminate between honest business men and dishonest business men, and the cultivation of contempt for law and constituted authority, would be likely to bring about such unrest and a sullen or hostile attitude on the part of many of the less fortunate towards the well-to-do. The efforts of demagogues to arouse class consciousness throughout the country and by a horizontal cleavage of society to make a political party whose platform and aims shall be hostile to the generally intelligent and the well-to-do, may easily explain much of this feeling. Moreover, general discontent with conditions was to be expected and was necessary to avoid the very serious danger of plutocracy and to release the hold that corporate corruption had obtained in politics. Now, however, we have reached a time when we must discriminate. The people are sufficiently aroused. Now let common sense prevail to distinguish between what is good and practical and what is luring but deceitful in its promise.

One of the great results of this crusade and of the tremendous increase of bodily comfort and of the average domestic happiness of the individual is the pricking of the conscience of the people at large to consider in their pride of wealth and enormous material development, the condition of those who have fallen behind in the race and are not sharing as much as they should the general benefit. It has manifested itself in the greater sense of responsibility that we see reflected in the donations of the rich to useful social and educational objects, in the active effort of the many who are not rich in

philanthropical and charitable organizations, and in the constant pressure for legislative measures, some wise and others unwise, to lift out of the slough of despond into which a part of the community, either through its own fault or through the hardship of conditions, has fallen.

Unwise Treatment of Children

But this greater social consciousness, beneficial as it is, has produced some hysterical excesses. It seems to be thought that general happiness is to be promoted by letting every one do as he pleases, as nearly as is consistent with his neighbor's enjoying the same privilege. Now this may correctly state a legitimate goal for adult men and women in society; but it is not the best rule by which to control methods of educating children and youth. Doubtless the kindergarten system in seeking to arouse on behalf of the young child an interest in what it sees about it by gratifying its senses and thus stimulating them in the right direction, is a good one. But I do not think it ought to be carried further. If applied in the development of the boy and girl and the budding man and woman it eliminates much of the discipline that is essential to secure a rounded and useful education, on the one hand, and to strengthen character and a spirit of sacrifice, on the other. Two or three decades ago, it would have seemed merely a platitude, but now it awakens controversy, to urge that the development of human character in morality, in force and effectiveness needs discipline and the overcoming of obstacles and the doing of unpleasant and disagreeable things. We are coddling our boys and girls. We are giving them too much freedom; we are humoring their immature and callow preferences and desires, and we are not, through obedience and authority, teaching them the lessons that are essentail to making them successful and useful members of the community. One of the absolutely indispensable parts of a useful education is thoroughness in learning. We are sacrificing thoroughness to superficial skimming of a wide curriculum of subjects which read well in the published annual reports of boards of education, municipal, county and State, but which do not indicate a better or more useful education than the less ambitious and simpler list of subjects that were taught in the schools of thirty years ago.

And more than this, we are seeking to cure defects in our education, as well as in our society, by more Democracy. We have

had the ridiculous exhibition of school children striking because some favorite principal was transferred to another school, and we find the newspapers stimulating such movements, and weak-minded parents looking with pride upon the courage and enterprise of their offspring. In my day, and that is not so long ago, such children, if they had gone home, would have been properly treated with a spanking that would have brought them to a sense of proportion and an understanding that school boards and superintendents are presumed to have more knowledge as to what is good for them than either the children themselves or irresponsible sensational newspapers. Could anything be better calculated to fill the heads of the children with foolish notions of their own importance, or interfere with their proper discipline? A mistake of the same kind, but of less degree, was made in our universities in the adoption of the general optional system on the assumption that a youth of seventeen or eighteen was competent to select the branches he ought to pursue in receiving an academic education. If he liked literature and history, he was permitted to limit his education to those subjects. If he liked mathematics or the sciences, he could confine his mental training to them. The truth was the plan led to the graduation of one-sided young men from academic institutions which were supposed to turn out well-rounded intellects upon which further education in professions or vocations could properly be based. Now we have realized the mistake in the universities, and there has been a reaction.

Condemns Sex Teaching

There is another danger in our present educational influences and environment. I refer to the spread of lubricity in literature, on the stage, and indirectly in education, under the plea that vice may be avoided by teaching its awful consequences. By dwelling on its details and explaining its penalties, sexual subjects are obtruded into discussion between the sexes, lectures are delivered on them, and text-books are written, and former restraints of modesty are abandoned. The restrictions upon conversations in society, which are said to have been inherited from the Victorian era, are spoken of with contempt. This change in the attitude of society, or that part that treats it as desirable, has only a small modicum of good, if any, while much of it is bad in its tendency and effect. In the first place, wicked editors seize upon the fact to sell their

literary wares by suggestive stories, treating of sex problems and picturing conditions as general in society, which, thank God, are the exceptions, and all this is under the pretense of carrying on a social reform. Moving pictures and plays are paraded before the public to teach a moral lesson, in which the pretended lesson is formulated in words, but in which the whole suggestion is prurient. The sordid purpose of the promoters is to make money out of stimulating lascivious ideas in those who otherwise might not be encouraged in them. Then the pursuit of education in sex hygiene is full of danger if carried on in general public schools. The sharp, pointed and summary advice of mothers to daughters, of fathers to sons, of a medical professor to students in a college upon such a subject is of course wise, but any benefit that may be derived from frightening students by dwelling upon the details of the dreadful punishment of vice is too often offset by awakening a curiosity and interest that might not be developed so early, and is too likely to set the thoughts of those whose benefit is at stake in a direction that will neither elevate their conversation with their fellows, nor make more clean their mental habit. They will learn all that is wise for them to learn through the natural communications of their parents and their family medical advisers. I deny that the so-called prudishness and the avoidance of nasty subjects in the last generation has ever blinded any substantial number of girls or boys to the wickedness of vice, or made them easier victims of temptation. It had generally been possible for them to recognize sin and to know that they ought to avoid it without leading them into an atmosphere which they can hardly breathe without polluted suggestion. The moving cause of this grotesque and dangerous addition to the curriculum in education is the view that the sins of the individual are not his, but those of society, and that society, by giving him knowledge of evil, will give him or her a panoply against its temptations. I can not think the small amount of possible good can make up for the great dangers of this experiment. The well-known lines of Pope are as true to-day as when he wrote:

> "Vice is a monster of so frightful mien,
> As to be hated needs but to be seen;
> Yet seen too oft, familiar with her face,
> We first endure, then pity, then embrace."

Criticism of a different nature might well be directed to many text-books that seek to inculcate aversion to the use of intoxicating liquor. The unwise extremity to which legislatures have gone in the requirement for such teaching, has stimulated a class of books which dwell on the results of the use of intoxicating liquor in such an exaggerated way that the pupils soon begin to understand that they are grotesque exaggerations, and, therefore, to become skeptical in respect to the whole matter.

In the commendable effort to lift the unfortunate and promote their greater happiness, good but misguided people are constantly seeking scapegoats for those who have yielded to temptation and sin, and to put the blame on someone else. The general attitude of suspicion and hostility toward the well-to-do and successful suggests them as a natural object of attack. Note the attempt to foist upon the owners of co-operative stores the responsibility for the yielding of their women employes to vice by saying that the small salaries which they paid led to that result. It was so unjust that no investigation could vindicate such a view for a moment. Sin is sin, and attempts to shift the responsibility for it in the individual by nice analysis of the predisposing causes for everyday use are sure to result in an impractical confusion, to minimize existing restraints, social and statutory, upon the sinner, and to render less effective human justice.

The saving grace of every successful and permanent government is the force of enlightened public opinion. That is made up as a composite or a conglomerate of the opinions of all the people, aided and guided by the views and influence of educated and high-minded and experienced leaders who have proven their wisdom. It is different from the vote at one election. It is something that grows of itself and formulates itself by an unseen initiative, and is manifested after the people have had full time to deliberate, not only by expressions at elections, but by the press, by the pulpit, and by many other agencies. Now, if contrary to that kind of public opinion, we are to organize a party to be constituted by the class of the unsuccessful, the unfortunate and the ignorant through attacks upon the other classes in the community and misrepresentation of their motives, and by holding out as possible the impossible, then it will be a sorry day for the Republic.

Therefore, what we ought to labor to do is to introduce more discipline and more thoroughness in our education, to uphold the

authority of the intelligent, experienced and the high-minded, and to enforce the wisdom of following their leadership. We ought to promote every agency that makes for morality and righteousness, and especially the Church of God that furnishes religion as the stimulus of moral teaching. Let people separate as they will as to their religious creeds; but let us all sustain in one common effort, the authority of churches in pointing out the duty of the individual and in strengthening man's sense of responsibility to God.

Sees End of Socialism

The relevancy of what I have said is as a basis for warning you not to permit the assumed coming change in the relation of government and society to the individual, which many persons are proclaiming as already at hand, to effect men and women of your condition and opportunity in your practical view as to what you must do in pursuing and achieving happiness. There is a great deal of socialism and socialistic aspiration of an unfounded but influential character floating in the atmosphere of our present-day thoughts, mingled with sensible anticipations by the less inspired, of real and possible progress. Some men are dreaming dreams and seeing visions, and there is nothing that angers them so as the effort, by a few practical considerations and the results of experience, to awaken them. What Mr. Huxley characterized as "the great tragedy of science—the slaying of a beautiful hypothesis by an ugly fact"—is sure to be enacted under the eyes of these sublimated philosophers.

What I am anxious to do is to convince you, if I can, that all these prophecies of a coming millenium, and all these changes between the relation of those who have not accumulated wealth, to those who have, and all these periods of eloquence, seeking to place responsibility for sin on somebody other than the sinner, should not be treated by you as something that is useful for "human nature's daily food." Don't be misled by this widely advertised protest against existing institutions, or the constant suggestion that to the faithful all things are about to change, that life is to be easier for every one, and that in some way or other we are to avoid suffering and reduce the sweat of the struggle for a livelihood and for success, which has heretofore been necessary. I beg of you to believe that such a view is erroneous. We are not going

into socialism, and, if we were, it would substitute a tyranny of the majority and a dead level of retrogression that would not mean more happiness for anybody. The ultimately clear perceptions of the American people are such that with some bitter experiences they are likely to have in adopting, if they do, some of the socialistic nostrums, that we shall come back to earth again and to a realization that whatever is worth having demands in its seeking hard work, fidelity to the task, courage of individual thought and action, self-sacrifices and self-restraint.

No Royal Road to Success

There is no royal read to the prizes of life, and we can not be legislated into them. No statute can be conceived which will furnish a vicarious method of casting the penalty for our moral defects and weaknesses of character on to someone else. In going out into life, bear in mind that kindly as many people are, generous as they may be in helping you and in giving you encouragement, the only certain means of winning what you desire is the making yourself useful to those whose benefit and welfare your work affects. If you are in an independent business, it is the good work you do for those who patronize you that will make them permanent customers and will enlarge your business. If you serve an employer, it is the value of the service to him that is going to secure you good wages and promotion. It is your fidelity in the interest of your employer and your enthusiasm in making your work tell in his behalf, that is going to make him think that it is in his interest to hold you in his employ, and to increase your compensation and your responsibilities. If, on the other hand, attuning yourself to the general chorus of discontent and unrest and hostility to the successful, you are constantly complaining that you are not getting enough, if you give him the impression that you are too big for the work you are doing, and that it has not your attention and your faithful application and interest, and the work itself does not show enthusiastic energy in his behalf that he would like to see, then you are not going to make a success.

The opportunity for success is just as great to-day as it ever was, if one brings loyalty and fidelity and intelligence and industry to the discharge of the task that he has assumed. Ask the head of

any great establishment what is his chief difficulty, and he will tell you in finding lieutenants whose loyalty and intelligent discretion and attention to duty he can depend upon, whether he is absent or present.

Don't make a mistake as to what is real success in life. "All that glisters is not gold." Look around you and tell me if you do not know many that have attained success in every worldly way, with whom you would not exchange your lot, humble as it may be. We can not all be merchant princes, or captains of industry, or leaders of the great professions, or presidents, Supreme Justices, or successful statesmen. Neither ability nor circumstances may make it possible. But every man and woman of you can do well his daily task. Every one can be loyal to the service he is in. Every one can be industrious. Every one can be honest, fair and generous to his fellow man. Every one can help someone else in affliction. Every one can love his wife and family, and can bring up his children with clean, moral minds and with proper standards. I wouldn't abate in the slightest your ambition to get on in the world and to win the highest success. What I am anxious to emphasize, however, is that after you have realized your ambition, whatever it is, or even if you have failed in it and have only led a humdrum life, the greatest, and I might almost say, the only real lasting pleasure you will have after living a generation will be the thought of the good work you have tried to do for your family, for your community, and for your fellow man. The most precious legacy you will leave to your children will be a high character, tested and proven by an honest, useful courageous life.

A Tribute to Unmarried Women

I congratulate the young ladies of the Pierce School and of the graduating class that they are fitting themselves to earn their own living, and I hope they will go out and earn it. The happiest condition for a woman and for a man is that of matrimony, but where a woman is not independent, the great danger to her future happiness is that she will accept any husband rather than live unmarried. There is a disposition on the part of many people to regard her life as a failure if she does not marry. The strong impulse to avoid such a verdict leads to matches that do not promote the happiness of either the woman or the man. The dreadful

looseness in severing the marriage tie which now prevails in this country is seriously threatening the institution that is most essential in our civilization, that of the home; and one way to avoid this evil is to stimulate greater care in the contracting of marriage. The trouble is that the ease with which divorces can be obtained tends to recklessness in the acceptance of a partner. I think every father who is not able to leave his daughter money enough to make her independent of matrimony owes it to her to give her some professional training that will enable her to earn her own living and only accept as her husband a man of her heart, and the man whom her intelligence assures her is the man to make her happy. There are, oh so many noble women who have never married, and whose lives have been a benediction. Their real and single blessedness is evidence, not that they were not sought for, but that they had the courage and independence to say, "No, not until the man whom I can love and who loves me, whom I can make happy and who will make me happy asks me to marry him, will I do so."

And now, members and graduates of the Pierce School let me congratulate you on the opportunity you have had for thoroughness in business education and training. Let me hope that in the useful work you are to render to your employer, to your community, or to your country, as the case may be, Miss Pierce will have pride in the fact that it was given to her materially to contribute to your success.

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